

## MA'S PRETTIES<sup>1</sup>

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**B**EN BROOKS filled his mouth with mashed potatoes, pushed the emptied plate to the center of the table, and kicked his chair back. It was Saturday night and he made ready to go to Almont. He ran his fingers through his mat of yellowish-gray hair, dirt-seamed fingers of a farm-laborer, as he went for his coat and hat on the nail behind the door. He had no team of horses to harness, not even a worked-out mare and paint-bare buggy, such as the "renters" went to town in. That had all gone long ago when the land went. He was no longer even a steady farm-hand. All that was left him was the old house with its garden patch, and the barn, which now housed a few chickens.

His daughters, Aggie and Josie, clearing away the supper dishes, looked at each other.

"Pa, you ain't goin' without seein' Ma!"

Ben grunted, and started up the stairs. His wife sat propped up in bed, muttering to herself. On the little table beside the bed, he saw the pie-tin on which Ma burned mullein-leaves, and the old tin funnel through which she inhaled the fumes when she felt an attack of asthma coming on. Ben shuffled in the doorway and rubbed the back of his hand against his unshaven face. It might go hard with Ma if she started to wheeze, now that she was so bad with her side.

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"Is that you there, Ben? — Get me the little jug — over the door — You be careful, now — It's cracked."

She tilted the jug upon the patch-quilt, a brown jug, with cat-tails painted on it. She had won it in a race at the Fair, when she was Sadie Chambers and "keeping company" with Ben Brooks. Her bony hands moved; her fingers felt about. She picked up a twenty-five cent piece and three nickels. The effort tired her.

"Put the jug back — Careful, now — You take them forty cents an' get them earrings — They must be fixed by now — Ma died in 'em. I want to die in 'em."

"Don't be a fool, Ma! You ain't goin' to die. Did n't Doctor John say you was goin' to last longer 'n me?"

"I'm a-breathin' awful heavy."

"Don't talk like that, Ma. We got to have you." Ben put his hand on his wife's thin shoulder. "You wait till I bring back them earrings of your'n, anyhow."

"Don't let that Sam talk you into spendin' any of them forty cents, now."

"Don't begin a-wheezin' while I'm gone."

His daughters followed him out onto the porch.

"Now, Pa. You come home early. You know Ma's sick."

Ben hurried down the path. It was a habit formed on the many Saturday nights when, because he took a glass, or at most two glasses, of beer, his wife's shrill, "Don't you be a-gettin' drunk, now!" pursued him far down the road. But he did not turn around, when out of sight, to shake his fist in the direction of the house and exclaim, "You old fool!" Nor did he mutter, as he plodded on, "The old miser. Don't I know? Ain't I seen her a-hangin' of them old dresses of her'n out on the line so's the farmers' wives 'ud think she'd lots of things? She's cracked about her pretties!" He did not even whistle to himself.

He found Old Sam leaning against the watering-trough at Predmore's Corners, waiting for him. Like

two old horses meeting in a strange pasture, they rubbed up against each other. This was their way of greeting every Saturday night. On the mile and a half to town they did not exchange a word.

On the hotel corner, Ben turned to Sam. "Got a dime?"

"No. Have you?"

"No."

"We'll get a dime or two," said Sam.

"Editor Tinsman might have a job he wants done," Ben suggested.

"Or Ed Snover, or Doc Greenshields," added Sam. "Marb Brab might have something."

"I got forty cents Ma gave me to get her earrings," Ben confided.

"Have ye? We'll get a dime or two, somehow."

The two old men waited on Newberry's Corner. Marb Brab came along.

"Good evening, boys."

"Howdy, Mr. Brab."

Marb Brab went on, without offering them a job. Editor Tinsman said "Hello!" to them as he crossed the street to his office. Al Jersey came along. They stepped out in the middle of the sidewalk, scuffled a bit, and laughed loudly. But he had nothing for them.

"I'd better get Ma's earrings, 'fore it's too late."

"Better wait a bit."

"No, I'd better go."

"If you work it right, mebbe Tibbits will take just thirty cents."

"Catch Roy Tibbits a-doin' anything like that!"

"Mebbe I'll get something while you're gone," Sam concluded.

Ben started up the street.

Charlie Wade, the photographer, passed Newberry's Corner, and Lawyer Moreland, and Ed Snover.

"Got anything?" Ben asked, when he returned.

"Let's go an' look in the drugstore window," Sam

suggested. "Mebbe Hepplethwaite 'll want us to turn the ice-cream freezer."

They walked up and down in front of the plate-glass window. Hepplethwaite didn't beckon to them. They heard the town clock strike ten — there was little chance of their earning anything.

Sam went through his pockets. "We ain't got nothin' we can borrow a dime or two on, have we?"

"Ma's sick. She thinks a wonderful lot of them earrings. If it was next week, when Ma'd be better—"

"You might say you just forgot," Sam interrupted. "Next Saturday night we'd sure make some money an' get 'em back."

"Ma's sick. It's one of her pretties."

"Let's go home, then," Sam grumbled. "I'm tired of a-hangin' around here."

They started for home. Farmers drove past them. A wagon loaded with three generations of Jeddo's, good-natured, noisy, the laughter of the women and young girls sounding shrilly above the gruff voices of the men, clattered up from behind. "Hello, Ben! Hello, Sam! Want a ride? Tumble in, boys! Tumble in! Lots of room!"

The two old men shook their heads and tramped on. Ben did not brag of the exploits that ended when he married Sadie Chambers; nor did Old Sam talk of the Saturday nights when he, and not his red-headed son, was hired man of the Predmore Farm. They reached Predmore's Corners. "Good-night, Sam!"

"'Night!"

"I got them earrings, anyhow," Ben prided himself, as he went along the stretch of road. "An' I ain't had a drink. Won't Ma be surprised!"

Aggie and Josie came to the door when they heard Ben's step. "Pa! Oh, Pa!" they called to him. "Ma's dead!"

"Now, now, Josie! Don't say that! She ain't, Aggie! She ain't, Josie! Say she ain't dead!"



Mrs. Lowell was the first of the neighbors to come in the next day. She brewed strong tea for Ben and looked after the girls:

"Now you run up-stairs, Josie, an' you, Aggie, an' get fixed. People will begin a-comin' soon. An' you, Ben, go put on that black coat of your'n."

Ben wandered from room to room. His daughters watched him. He wiped the face of the Swiss clock with his sleeve. He found the World's Fair souvenir spoon in the china-closet, picked it up and put it down again. He took the silver-handled cane that Uncle George had brought with him from the city, and carried it about.

Aggie turned to Josie. "See, he's already a-takin' of Ma's pretties."

"He'll sell 'em all for drink, now Ma's gone."

"Ma loved Grandma Chambers's earrings, did n't she, Aggie?"

"Yes, Josie. An' the jet beads with the locket on 'em. An' the Swiss clock."

"An' the silver pitcher-frame."

"An' Uncle George's cane with the silver end."

"Ma loved her pretties."

"Pa'll sell 'em all for drink, now Ma's gone."

They began to cry.

"We don't care for ourselves," Aggie appealed to Mrs. Lowell. "It's you ought to get something nice. You've always been so good to Ma."

"Yes, one of the nicest," said Josie. "It'd be such a comfort to Ma to know you got the best. Pa'll sell 'em all for drink, now Ma's gone."

Ben took Grandma Chambers's earrings into the parlor where Ma was lying in her coffin. "She did n't know, she did n't know I brought 'em home. Here they be, Ma! Here they be. See, on the coffin!"

Ben was moved by the appearance of the parlor, by the silence, by the heavy odor, that oppressive odor present at funerals, in rooms where windows and shut-

ters are seldom opened. Mrs. Lowell had made everything beautiful for Ma's last day at home. She had brought all the best flowers from her garden and disposed of them about the room. Ben saw the white asters which Mrs. Lowell had piled upon Ma's rocker and set at the head of the coffin; the "store flowers" brought by Undertaker Hopkins that she had placed upon the coffin-lid; the pitcher of cosmos beside the family Bible on the little stand in the window; the zinnias on the marble-topped table in the corner; the dahlias on the window-sills; the stray asters and corn-flowers pinned to the curtains; the sweet alyssum twined around the picture-wire of Ma's daguerreotype — Mrs. Lowell had always been good to Ma.

Mrs. Lowell had brought chicken-broth and tidied up Ma's room whenever Ma was sick. She had been a great help to Ma when Uncle George came home to die. Now Ma lay in her coffin, white, with her hands folded over her breast. Ma would have a fine funeral. Mrs. Lowell had seen to everything.

His daughters were not like Mrs. Lowell. They did n't know how to make a room look pretty. Ben had hoped that Aggie and Josie would turn out differently, when they had been too young instead of too old to be married, and Ma had gone about the house singing. Now Ma was gone, and left all her pretties behind.

"Aggie! Josie!" Ben called to his daughters. "Ma loved her pretties. You can have 'em all. You divide 'em, I can't."

Aggie and Josie looked at each other. The pretties were theirs! What had got into Pa?

"Mis' Lowell ought to get one," added Ben. "She's always been so good to Ma. The beads an' locket, she might like that?"

"Now, Pa, you better go into the dinin'-room an' lay down. You're so tired."

"Mis' Lowell's always been good to Ma," Ben repeated.

"You're so tired, Pa. Go lay down on the lounge."

They watched him shuffle out of the room, and waited until they heard the springs of the lounge creak under his weight. They knew there were pretties in Ma's bureau that Pa had forgotten about. They started up the stairs, treading carefully, and keeping close together. They reached Ma's door. Aggie turned the door-knob with both hands and stepped softly into the room, with Josie close behind her. They left the door open so that they might hear Pa better. They opened the closet door, hesitated, looked in. There was Ma's bureau. They tried the two top drawers. They were locked.

"The keys, Josie! Where be the keys?"

"Ma kept 'em rolled up in a stockin'."

"We'll find 'em."

They opened the next drawer, filled with Ma's "best" clothes — the Paisley shawl, Ma's "best" silk dress, the dress of Henrietta cloth, the cashmere dress, Ma's "best" muslin dress, and the red flannel skirt edged with lace knit out of red yarn.

Both pulled at the third drawer. It flew open. Balls of yarn — pink, green, red, yellow, blue, of various sizes, left over from many quiltings, rolled out upon the floor. They felt about for rolled-up stockings, in the cotton-batting, under the piles of aprons, between the folds of babies' clothing.

"Them be ours, Aggie."

"Where be them stockin's?"

They opened the fourth drawer. Their hands threshed about, ran into each other, tumbled the contents. They straightened up and looked at the shelves.

"They would n't be in them boxes, would they, Josie?"

"The basket! Let's try that."

They took down the large, clean, basswood market-basket. Josie lifted the hinged cover. They found Ma's white wool "fascinator" hood, a pair of woolen leggings, Ma's "best" knit slippers, a thick brown veil, and a pair of black woolen mittens.

"Here be the stockin's."

They upset the basket. In a rolled up pair of gray woolen stockings Josie found the keys.

"Give 'em to me. Go an' look, Josie. Pa may be a-comin'."

"No, we'd hear 'im. Open the drawer, Aggie, the right-hand one."

They saw the lacquer box and the red leather purse that Uncle George had brought Ma from the city. Aggie took the purse. Ma used to keep her money in it. But it was empty. The lacquer box held Grandma Chambers's things. They lifted out carefully the shawl of Spanish lace, a small Bible with a gold clasp, six worn silver spoons, a coral cameo breast-pin, a piece of thin gold chain, and Grandma Chambers's jet beads with the locket.

"The idea of Pa's wantin' to give away Grandma Chambers's beads an' locket," said Aggie. "The idea!"

"It's just like Pa. He ain't to be trusted."

"Now that locket, that locket 'ud look right smart on you, Josie. Ma'd be glad you had it, I know. An' Ma'd like me to have Grandma Chambers's earrings."

"You'll own three spoons, Aggie, an' I'll own the other three. Mebbe the lace shawl 'ud look best on me?"

"I'll have the Bible, an' you can have the cameo pin. We'll find something for Mis' Lowell."

The upper left-hand drawer was filled with many small pasteboard boxes, one on top of the other. One of them held Ma's "best" switch—gray, like her own hair—with the side-comb and bone hairpins in place. They took out the comb and pins. In a little box within a box they found an old needle-book that had belonged to Ma's grandmother. From another box they took a black switch, worn before Ma's hair turned. Josie thought it might come in handy. In other boxes were several pairs of Ma's "specs," which she had put away as she needed stronger ones; Ma's under plate of false teeth, which she had never used; a lock of some one's hair; several gold-



plated breast-pins in the form of flowers; and a round locket that looked like a watch, with pictures of Pa and of Ma, taken on their wedding-day.

"You take the breast-pins, an' I'll have the round locket. We'll find something for Mis' Lowell."

They looked around Ma's room. Pa's bureau did not interest them. They took down the jug from the shelf over the door. Its contents rattled. They upset the jug upon the patch-quilt, and divided fifty cents between them. Then they went down-stairs.

"The cane, Josie, you take that, an' I'll have the spoon from the World's Fair. Ma was proud of Uncle George, was n't she, Josie? She'd want us to keep the cane, an' the silk hat in the grand leather case, an' the white gloves, an' the box with the cigars in it."

They went into the parlor, where Ma lay in her coffin.

"Them earrings are mine, now, ain't they, Josie? You got the beads an' locket. We'll find something for Mis' Lowell."

Ben heard them. "Had n't I better take the pretty over to Mis' Lowell? She's always been so good to Ma."

Aggie and Josie looked at their father and at each other.

"Yes, Pa. We'll get it."

They went back into Ma's room. They looked around, at the top of the bureau, at the shelf over the door. They opened the door of Ma's closet, and closed it again. They saw the jug where they had left it on the patch-quilt.

"Ma would n't want us to give away that patch-quilt of her'n, would she, Josie?"

"No, Aggie. That'll be good on our bed, cold nights. We'll give Pa the brown one. It'll be warmer."

Aggie took a ball of string, wound smooth and hard — pink and green string from the drugstore — tied end to end, and Ma's jack-knife from the pocket hanging on the closet door.

"You get a sheet of paper, Josie, from the bottom of one of them drawers."

They wrapped up the jug carefully, and went downstairs.

"Here it is, Pa. We did it up nice. Be careful now, an' don't you undo it."

Ben was pleased. It looked like a Christmas present. Mrs. Lowell had always been good to Ma. He took the South road to the Lowell farm. He saw a woman near the red barn. He felt of the parcel, turned it about. His fingers followed the outlines. He wanted to undo it, but he was afraid he would not be able to do it up so nice. The woman in the barnyard was Mrs. Lowell, feeding her chickens.

Ben worked open a corner of the paper, and inserted his finger, without disturbing the string.

"Mis' Lowell should 'a' had something nicer. It ain't good enough to be given for Ma."

He started back for home. "I ain't goin' to take that jug to her."

He took a few steps, then straightened up and turned about. His heart beat fast; there was a light in his eyes. He was young again, one of a big crowd, watching the girls' race at the Fair. His Sadie was leading them all. Everybody cheered for her. She ran right into his arms, and they gave her the first prize—the very jug he had in his hands.

He took the jug out of its wrappings, and hurried across the farmyard to Mrs. Lowell.

"I'm a-bringin' you one of Ma's pretties——this here little jug with the cat-tail paintin' on it——she won it at the Fair. She was Sadie Chambers then, an' she beat all the other girls, an'— Oh, you ought 'er seen how she ran!"